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ABSTRACT

Reviewed is research on parents' and others' responses to a child's temperament and the effects of early temperament on the child's development. Research findings are seen to indicate that children with difficult temperaments need to be handled with an exceptional amount of patience, firmness, and understanding. (SBH)

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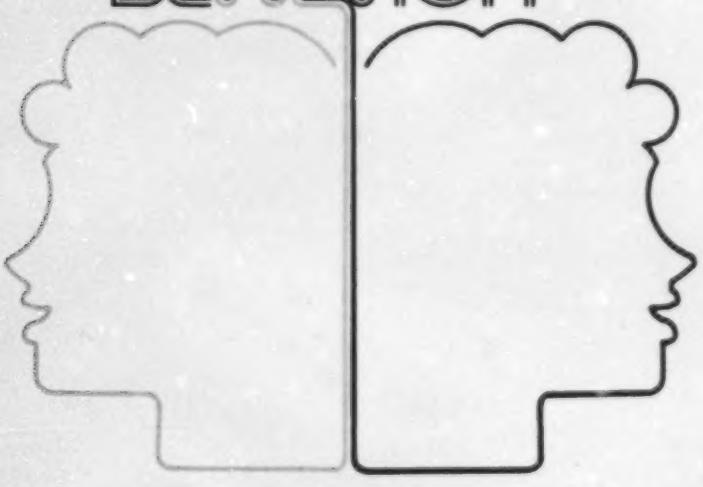

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STYLES IN TEMPERAMENT & THEIR EFFECT ON BEHAVIOR

by Herbert Yahraes

Alexander Thomas and Stella Chess are rather unusual colleagues. He is professor of psychiatry at the New York University School of Medicine, and she is professor of child psychiatry at the same institution. For more than 20 years they have been working together on a major research problem: the effect of temperament on the mental health of children and of the adults these children become. For somewhat longer, they have also been colleagues in marriage.

The one collaboration has produced child-rearing information of decided value to parents, pediatricians, and the mental health professions. The other has produced four intelligent children.

Thanks to this partnership in research, science has substantiated what most mothers for thousands of years have probably known—that children differ from infancy onward. Though mothers have known this, many of them, at least in recent decades, have feared to act upon the corollary: that children having basic temperamental differences ought to be handled differently.

As Thomas puts it, "parents by and large have been intimidated by child-care authorities." Since a child's response to parental handling will vary with the child's temperament, the same rule cannot be applied to every child—a finding that helps to explain the swings of the pendulum in child guidance. During the 1930s and before, the prevailing wisdom emphasized strict rules for feeding and discipline. When it became clear that not all children thrived equally well under this regimen, the pendulum began swinging to the opposite extreme. During the next few decades, the authoritative word was *permissiveness.*

Now, in line with the research findings on temperament, which other investigators have verified, the pendulum has begun to swing back. With luck, it will not make a full return and parents will realize the need to deal differently with different offspring.

Temperament is a psychological trait, as is intelligence. It is probably best defined as "behavioral style." It strongly influences the development of personality.

The way that parents and others respond to a child's temperament can help determine whether his or her behavior will be deviant or

normal. There are many patterns of normal behavior; and, as Thomas and Chess point out, temperament is only *one* attribute of the growing child. It is a most important attribute, but for a rounded picture of the child and an explanation of problem behavior, it has to be considered in relation to the child's abilities and motivation and to the play on all of these forces in his environment.

In 1956 in their major research project, Thomas and Chess began to study the behavior development of New York City children. They now have 136 individuals—from some 80 families—whose temperamental attributes and behavior have been observed from early infancy into adolescence and continue to be observed. Most of the children come from middle-class or upper-middle-class families, in which most of the fathers are professional men or business executives. These children have been compared with a sample of children from Puerto Rican working-class families.

Extensive information about each child and his family was obtained through parental interviews, direct observation, teachers' reports, and batteries of psychological tests. Nine separate characteristics of temperament were found. Statistical analysis showed that two-thirds of the children could be described by one of three different combinations of traits. In the rest of the children, the traits were too mixed to be categorized.

The *difficult children* were placed in the research reports because of the deep impression they made on all members of the investigation team. As infants these youngsters displayed high irregularity in eating, sleeping, and eliminating. They tended to noisily withdraw or protest vigorously when exposed to any new stimulus or situation, whether it pertained to food, clothing, people, or place. Eventually they adapted. But exposure to new demands—such as going to a nursery school or a birthday party—almost invariably elicited howling or other negative behavior. "These are the children," the investigators report, "who shriek more frequently than they whine, who give belly laughs more often than they gently smile." As 3-year-olds, they expressed disappointment "not with a whimper but with a bang"; frustration often produced a violent tantrum.

Some members of the research team had a designation for such children—"mother-killers." That may be a little strong, but the difficult children did engender feelings of frustration, guilt, and anxiety and, in the words of another investigator, "tend to convert normal mothers into abnormal mothers."

The *easy children* were markedly different. They were regular in their habits, positive in their responses to new situations, quick to adapt to new foods and people, and generally cheerful. They enjoyed learning new games and taking part in new activities, including school. They were their parents' delight.

The third group was characterized as *children who are slow to warm up.* They adapted slowly and tended to withdraw from new situations, generally with little or no fussing. As infants they were likely to respond to a new food by letting it dribble out of the mouth. In nursery school they stayed on the sidelines for several weeks. In

kindergarten, if pushed to take part in some new activity, they struggled quietly to escape.

The difficult children comprised only about 10 percent of the sample. But approximately 70 percent of them—in contrast to 30 percent of all the group—developed behavior problems that were considered to need psychiatric attention.

The easy children constituted 40 percent of those under study; 18 percent of them developed problems.

The slow-to-warm-up children accounted for 15 percent of the total and for almost 20 percent of those with psychiatric problems.

When the investigators sought explanations for the striking differences in temperament, they found none, either in the developmental histories of the children or in the characteristics—including ideas about child rearing—of the parents. The parents of the children in any one of the three groups could not be distinguished from the parents as a whole.

The researchers did find that behavior problems most often arose because parents did not know how to handle a difficult or a slow-to-warm-up child. And the problems continued because the parents were either unable to accept or unwilling to follow professional guidance.

Of 42 cases with a behavior disorder in childhood, about one-half had recovered by adolescence and about one-third had grown worse. In the main, the parents of those who recovered had followed psychiatric advice and reduced stress on the child—stress created by expectations that did not harmonize with the child's temperament; with some exceptions, the other parents had not. The latter group's children had then been placed under direct treatment, which in many cases continues.

So far, adolescence has brought five new cases. They are marked by depression, hostility, rebellion, or antisocial behavior, and their symptoms are more severe than those that became apparent earlier.

How can basic temperamental differences be explained? A Norwegian investigation, which used the techniques of the American team to study identical and nonidentical twins, indicates that the answer may be found, at least in part, in genetic differences.*

The investigator, Anna Marie Torgersen, studied her subjects at 2 months of age, which is about the time that a baby's behavior becomes stabilized, and again at 9 months. Each time she found that the identical twins, the ones with the same genes, were likely to resemble their co-twins in temperament much more closely than were the nonidentical twins. There seemed to be a genetic component for all the nine traits identified by the New York team. Moreover, the curves showing the distribution of temperament traits in the Norwegian children turned out to be similar to those of the

* Other factors may also be involved. An NIMH-supported study by Arnold J. Sameroff and Melvin Zax at the University of Rochester found four maternal variables that correlated with difficult temperament in the child at 4 months of age. These were a high level of anxiety in the mother (as measured before the birth of the child), black race, low social class, and large number of children.

New York City group. This was true in spite of some marked differences in child-rearing practices.

Evidence for heredity's role in temperament is strengthened by a finding from the New York study. Children of the Puerto Rican working-class sample showed much the same distribution of temperamental characteristics as the children from the middle-class and upper-middle-class samples. Again, this was so despite differences in child-rearing practices.

Does a child's behavior style signify anything about his characteristics as an adult? In answer, the investigators point out that attempts to predict what children will be like, years ahead, on the basis of their present characteristics and environment usually are not successful. And they observe that temperament—even though it seems to be innate, and even though they advise parents to live with it and adapt themselves to it rather than try to change it—can and does change.

Among the children they have studied, major temperamental characteristics have persisted into adolescence in many cases, while in many other cases they have not. In explanation it seems reasonable to conjecture that temperament interacts with two other major characteristics, a child's motives and abilities, and all three interact with a child's environment to produce certain behaviors. As these behaviors in turn interact with environmental features—some old and familiar, others new and strange—a given aspect of temperament may or may not be retained. And, if retained, it may become stronger or weaker or fade into insignificance.

To illustrate some of the circumstances involved in the continuity and discontinuity of temperament, Thomas and Chess cite the following cases:

- Carl, one of the difficult children, had done very well in high school but had a miserable time during his first few months of college. He found it almost impossible to study, made no friends, and grew worried. Between the first and second terms he asked to talk to a psychiatrist, who in one discussion helped him to recognize his behavior style. Every new experience had been stormy, he realized, but once he had adapted to a situation, he had become zestfully involved. During his second college term, his difficulties disappeared.
- Nancy had been another of the difficult children, and her parents, unlike Carl's, had responded negatively. By the time she entered elementary school she was displaying fear of the dark and engaging in fits of explosive anger. Her trouble was diagnosed as a neurotic behavior disorder. But during the fourth and fifth grades she developed musical and dramatic talent and won praise from her teachers and the parents of schoolmates. Her own parents then changed their attitude and began to show pride in her. She became a bright and happy adolescent.
- David as a child had been active, cheerful, friendly—one of the easy children. But at 17 he was fat and apathetic and, in spite of his high IQ, began sliding down the academic hill. His parents were in almost constant discord but agreed upon and kept emphasizing a

single point: David's school problems, since he was so intelligent, must be caused by poor teaching. He gradually adopted the same attitude.

• Norman was a pleasant and intelligent child but highly distractible—given to quick shifts of attention and apparent forgetfulness. His father, a hard-driving professional man, viewed the boy's distractibility as a mark of irresponsibility and lack of character, and told him so. Brushed aside was the mother's explanation that the boy was normal enough but temperamentally unable to work as hard as his father did. Efforts by Norman to stick to his studies for long, uninterrupted periods led to tension and numerous tics. At 17 he had dropped out of two colleges in 1 year and had become depressed. "My father doesn't respect me," he told a psychiatrist, "and let's face it, why should he?"

From such cases it can be concluded that no *one* aspect of a child is necessarily an important factor in the development of behavior problems. With David, for example, temperament traits that marked his early years and seemed to indicate a happy future were submerged when his parents, in almost paranoid style, began attributing his school difficulties to his teachers. Perhaps in such cases, temperament is actually changed, not merely weakened or submerged; the investigators are not yet sure. They do point out that environmental factors can have the opposite effect—can intensify a given characteristic. Norman's distractibility was only worsened by his father's attitude.

As investigators also note, Nancy's experience—she was the girl who began displaying theatrical talent—illustrates that the emergence of new factors in either the child or his environment can decisively influence the course of development. Carl's experience as a college freshman demonstrates that problems of temperament cannot only persist but also, when understood, can be overcome. Norman's trouble with his father exemplifies the potentially tragic outcome of rejecting a child's temperamental style instead of helping him cope with it.

Since temperament, in reaction with other factors, so strongly helps to shape behavior in the developing child, how can parents most effectively deal with it? In general, these psychiatric researchers suggest, parents should try to make their demands and expectations consonant with the child's temperamental characteristics.

With easy children, that advice can usually be followed without undue trouble. Such children adapt fairly readily to almost any child-rearing program. The trouble comes with the difficult children, the slow-to-warm-up children, and children who can be easily distracted. Children who are very persistent and who have either a very high or very low level of activity may also develop problems if demands and expectations are excessive for their temperamental style.

The mother and father of one difficult boy displayed unusual tolerance and consistency. As the investigators recount, the parents took his stormy adjustment periods calmly, waited out his negative

moods without becoming angry, and dealt good-humoredly with the battles between him and the family's younger children. Though permissive, the parents set safety limits, and they consistently explained the rights of his peers. Consequently, by the time he entered nursery school he was functioning well—except for the usual difficulties triggered by new situations. The parents came to understand that the youngster's behavior was simply the expression of his characteristics. Because of this constructive approach, troublesome behavior did not become symptomatic of a behavior disorder, as it did with most other such youngsters.

As might be expected, this research has led to numerous suggestions for those involved with the care of children. The gist of the advice can be stated quickly: Parents and teachers and others should recognize what a given child can and cannot do, and they should act accordingly.

The slow-to-warm-up child should be allowed to adapt to his surroundings at his own speed. Pressure to move quickly into new situations may only strengthen his tendency to withdraw. He does, though, need to be encouraged to try new experiences—and here a youngster named Bobby is an object lesson. Starting in babyhood, whenever Bobby rejected a new food, his parents crossed it off his diet list. Also, because he shied away from the kids on the playground, they kept him at home. At 10 he was a loner, and he subsisted mainly on hamburgers, applesauce, and medium-boiled eggs.

Youngsters who rank low in persistence and high in distractibility should be encouraged to function up to their abilities. Persistent and nondistractible children should be warned well ahead of time when they will be required—in the interest of the family's schedule, or the schools—to drop what they are doing. Children with difficult temperaments need to be handled with an exceptional amount of patience and firmness and understanding if they are ever to learn appropriate behavior.

The investigators have beautifully summed up the practical implications of their findings. "A child who stands at the periphery of the group in nursery school," they remind us, "may be anxious and insecure, but he may also be expressing his normal temperamental tendency to warm up slowly. An infant with irregular sleep cycles who cries loudly at night may possibly be responding to a hostile, rejecting mother, but he may also be expressing his temperamental irregularity. A 6-year-old who explodes with anger at his teacher's commands may be aggressive and oppositional, but he may also be showing the frustration reactions typical of a very persistent child when he is asked to terminate an activity in which he is deeply absorbed. A mother's guilt and anxiety may be the result of a deep-seated neurosis, but they may also be the result of her problems and confusion in handling an infant with a temperamental pattern that characterizes a very difficult child."

Thomas and Chess have helped a number of professional people in this country and abroad to develop simple means of assessing the temperaments of infants and young children. An American leader in

this area, William B. Carey, a pediatrician associated with the Children's Hospital, Philadelphia, has developed a questionnaire that mothers of babies from 4 to 8 months old can complete in 20 minutes and that can be scored in 10 minutes. Its principal value is in determining the presence of the difficult baby syndrome.

With further work, investigators hope to develop rating scales for use by pediatricians, teachers, psychiatrists, and other professionals to help assess the temperamental styles of babies. Meanwhile, those parents who seek to understand the temperaments of their children are likely to deal most effectively and wisely with them.

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